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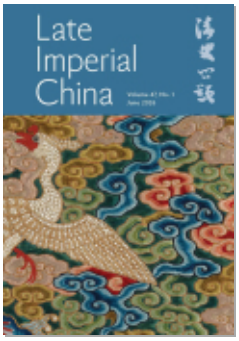

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The Rise of a Mountain King: Geopolitics and the Tributary System on the Fifteenth-Century Sichuan-Tibetan Frontier

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In 1442, the Ming court received a memorial from Gelek Gyaltsen (Keluo'e Jiancan 克羅俄監粲), grand pacification commissioner (*xuanweishi* 宣慰使) of Dongbuhanhu 董卜韓胡.[1] Being a native chieftaincy (*tusi* 土司) located along the Sichuan-Tibetan frontier, Dongbuhanhu remained largely semiautonomous from imperial administration during the Ming dynasty.[2] In the memorial, Gelek Gyaltsen raised a series of seemingly aggressive demands: He not only requested the establishment of a new tributary route traversing the territory of Zagu 雜谷, a native chieftaincy neighboring Dongbuhanhu, but also sought the Ming's provision of official documentation, linguistic

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1. In this article, proper nouns (such as personal names, place names, and organization names) are restored to their original language's English spelling. When restoration is not possible, they are presented in Chinese Pinyin, along with the original Chinese text.

2. Throughout imperial Chinese history, the central government frequently endorsed powerful local leaders to implement indirect rule over frontier regions. The "haltered and bridled" prefectures (*jimi fuzhou*) during the Tang and Song dynasties exemplified this negotiated relationship between central courts and frontier powers. During the Yuan dynasty, Mongol rulers gradually integrated these indirectly ruled regions into a hierarchy of political-military administration. This system eventually consolidated into a standardized institution of extrabureaucratic governance, commonly known in the Ming and Qing dynasties as the *tusi* system, with appointed frontier leaders serving as native officials. For a concise overview of the *tusi* system and its relationship with the imperial central government, see Crossley, Siu, and Sutton, *Empire at the Margins*, 7–10.

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support, and military escorts for tributary envoys. Fundamentally, what Gelek Gyaltsen sought was to institutionalize his tributary privileges at the direct expense of Zagu's geopolitical autonomy, a demand that challenged established Ming frontier protocols. Confronted with this challenge, the Ming emperor instructed the Sichuan provincial administration to conduct a thorough investigation.[3] Ultimately, Gelek Gyaltsen's requests were denied.

Gelek Gyaltsen's unsuccessful petition highlights significant tensions in the Ming tributary system's frontier implementation and raises many questions. For example, what was the geopolitical context of the fifteenth-century Sichuan-Tibetan frontier, particularly concerning relationships among native chieftain offices and their interactions with the Ming court? Why did Gelek Gyaltsen place such importance on tributary routes? And how did Ming responses to frontier petitions reshape the limits of acceptable indigenous agency within the imperial framework?

Through a micro-historical analysis of Dongbuhanhu's ascent in the mid-fifteenth century, this study examines the operational logic of the Ming tributary system on the frontier. The reconstruction of Gelek Gyaltsen's strategic maneuvering, initially in competition with Zagu and ultimately with the Ming court itself, reveals how frontier actors manipulated the tributary system to advance their local agendas. Tracing Dongbuhanhu's rise will demonstrate the profound impact of localized negotiations on how the tributary system worked on the ground, as the system's implications and unintended consequences for frontier dynamics often backfired on the Ming authorities.

Recent scholarship on Chinese frontier history has challenged conventional top-down narratives of imperial expansion by highlighting local agency. This study examines frontier agency through the lens of the tributary system, a cosmological and diplomatic framework in premodern East Asia. Previous work employs the term "tributary system" as both a general reference for a historical phenomenon and an analytical concept that examines hierarchical power relations centered on China.[4] More recent studies adopt an increasingly critical stance on this framework. On the one hand, scholars tended to separate ideological constructs from practical operations as the ritualized language of tributary interactions

3. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 94, Zhentong 7/7/*wuyin*, 1898.

4. Fairbank and Teng, *Ch'ing Administration*, 137.

often diverged from the pragmatic realities of statecraft.[5] On the other hand, moving beyond Sino-centric models, scholars now acknowledge the coexistence of tributary systems with alternative diplomatic paradigms, such as Tibetan Buddhist principles and treaty diplomacy.[6] In addition, attention has been redirected to tributary states, whose agency, motivations, and adaptations have been marginalized due to the overreliance on official Chinese records and imperial rhetoric.[7] These historiographical developments underscore the paradoxical consensus within the field: While the tributary framework remains indispensable for analyzing imperial China's foreign relations, its analytical limitations necessitate continual refinement.[8]

Reconstructing the operational logic of Ming tributary governance and its impact on Sichuan-Tibetan frontier politics through the case of Dongbuhanhu addresses these historiographical limitations. Although studies identify the Ming as the quintessential tributary system practitioner, its interactions with the outside world have long been eclipsed by the expansive reach of its Manchu successors.[9] Recently, scholars have reassessed this Qing-centric bias in the literature by highlighting Ming tributary interactions with the outside world.[10] They

5. Scholars in the edited volume *China Among Equals*, for example, argue that from at least the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, China did not rigidly enforce tributary system principles in foreign relations, but instead adopted flexible diplomatic practices. Prasenjit Duara even described the ideological dimension of the system as a mere "language game" while emphasizing the variability in its actual implementation. See Rossabi, *China Among Equals*; Duara, "Afterword."

6. To challenge the Sinocentric assumption embedded within the tributary model, Pamela Crossley introduces the concepts of "concentricities" and "simultaneousness" to characterize the Manchu sovereign's multilayered approach to governance. Inner Asian specialists also identified Buddhist principles as an important factor, in addition to tributary protocols, in legitimizing China's cross-border authority. See Crossley, *Translucent Mirror*; Brook, Praag, and Boltjes, *Sacred Mandates*.

7. Perdue, "Tenacious Tributary System."

8. For instance, while acknowledging that the phrase "Chinese world order" is "immortalized," Pamela Crossley highlighted the enduring critiques leveled by historians against the paradigm's ahistorical generalizations and contextual impoverishment. See Crossley, review of "*Cherishing Men from Afar*," 598.

9. Wills, *Embassies and Illusions*, 14.

10. A recent edited volume clearly demonstrates this historiographical trend by exploring how the tributary system functioned as a flexible framework for rulership and cross-cultural diplomacy in various frontier contexts during the Ming period. See Kauz and Rossabi, *Tribute System and Rulership in Late Imperial China*.

either emphasize the Ming's flexible deployment of tributary mechanisms alongside alternative diplomatic tools or scrutinize the negotiated nature of ritual and language in bilateral tributary relations.[11] Likewise, there has been a disproportionate emphasis in scholarship on "foreign tributaries" (*waiguo* 外國) over "frontier tributaries" (*siyi* 四夷).[12] Although foreign tributaries like Chosŏn and Ryukyu dominate the diplomatic record in terms of tributary participation, frontier tributaries such as those from the Tibetan plateau in fact maintained more sustained tributary relations with the Ming court than did most foreign powers.[13]

A detailed analysis of Dongbuhanhu's strategic engagement with tribute protocols—from ritual performance to territorial claims—demonstrates how local power brokers repurposed imperial institutions to advance their own regional authority. Although the two primary sources for this study—the *Ming shilu* and the reports preserved in Yu Qian's collected writings—were produced by the Ming court and Han literati and thus undoubtedly reflect politically charged Sinocentric assumptions, they also reproduce, often verbatim, numerous statements and responses attributed to frontier leaders. This feature makes it possible to reconstruct these actors' ideas and political logic, and, to some extent, to recover the original context in which they operated. Ultimately, the case exposes a paradox at the core of Ming frontier governance: The very tributary mechanisms designed to stabilize frontier power relations inadvertently enabled Dongbuhanhu to consolidate transregional

11. Kuhn, "Much More Than Tribute"; Wang, *Boundless Winds of Empire*.

12. It is important to note that the division between foreign and frontier polities is not a convention of modern diplomacy. The Ming did indeed maintain such a distinction in categorizing its tributaries. Wang Yuan-kang observed this division in a 1432 Ministry of War document preserved in Korea, although it was recorded in a relatively casual manner. Another primary source, written by a Ming official from the Ministry of Ritual and recently published in Taiwan, offers a mid-sixteenth-century example of these two categories of foreign status. See Koo, *"Imun" yŏkchu*, 39; Wang, "Rituals of Hierarchy," in Brook, Praag, and Boltjes, *Sacred Mandates*, 61; Chen, *Huang Ming waiyi chaogong kao jiaozhu*.

13. Nakajima Gakusho has conducted a quantitative study of the tributary participations of Ming China's major foreign tributaries, showing that most of them remained statistically and analytically peripheral. In comparison, frontier tributaries were much more engaged despite being largely omitted from mainstream narratives of Ming diplomacy. See Nakajima, "Structure and Transformation of the Ming Tribute Trade System," 141; Hu, "Mingdai Zangdi chaogong de lianghua kaocha."

influence, culminating in a mid-fifteenth-century frontier crisis that substantially eroded Ming authority along its western periphery.

Constructing Rulership with Ming Endorsement

The Sichuan-Tibetan frontier examined here corresponds to the eastern portions of modern-day Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture and Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, and extended into the eastern corridor linking Songpan, Maoxian, and Wenchuan counties. In Tibetan geographical culture, the region was also recognized as part of the eastern Kham. Geomorphologically, this area constitutes a high-altitude transitional zone (2,500–4,500 meters) bounded by the northwestern escarpment of the Min Mountains to the east, the Northwest Sichuan Grasslands to the north, the Dadu River valley to the west, and the Jiajin Mountains to the south. The region's vertical and rugged terrain and harsh continental climate supported only limited agricultural and pastoral activity, making human settlements in the region sparse and fragmented.

Socially, the Sichuan-Tibetan frontier was an established center for economic exchange and a crossroad of ethnic and cultural diversity. While a "frontier" typically denotes the outermost limits of a polity's administrative reach, a significant portion of this region experienced only limited imperial presence, hence functioning as the contact zone between distinct cultural spheres. From the Han to the Tang dynasty, the frontier was a borderland of Sino-Tibetan civilization where Chinese imperial forces interacted with Tibetan polities. In the Song dynasty, the region played a pivotal role in China's horse-procuring enterprise for its military competition with its northern rivals. During the Yuan, the Mongol khan continued to implement indirect administration over the region, yet the court's contradictory records concerning the region and its repeated adjustments to the local administrative system underscore the fragility of central authority on the ground.[14] Such a volatile power structure significantly influenced the Ming dynasty's engagement on the Sichuan-Tibetan frontier.

14. Petech, "Yuan Organization of the Tibetan Border Areas."

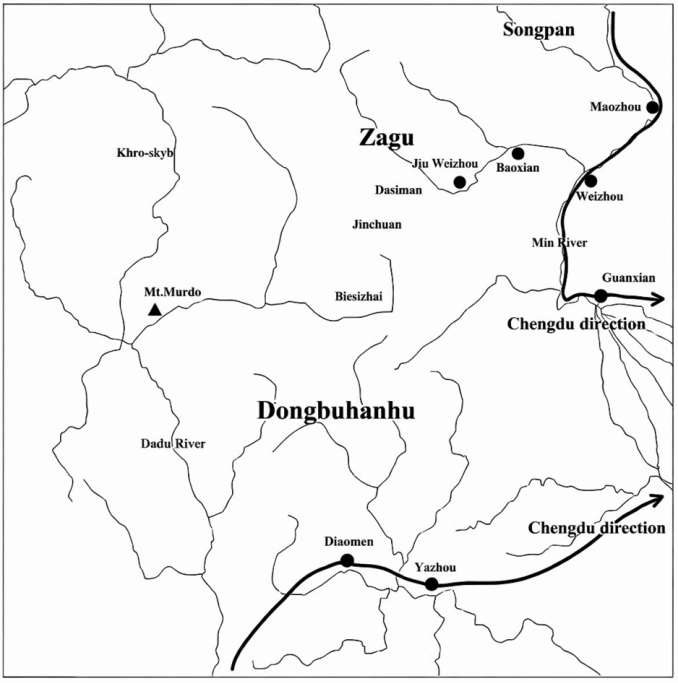

Figure 1. Fifteenth-century Sichuan-Tibetan frontier, with principal *tusi* polities, Ming garrison settlements, and major transportation routes.

During the early Ming, military garrisons coexisted with semiautonomous Tibetan polities on the frontier. Administratively, Ming imperial presence in the early fifteenth century extended only to the western foothills of the Min Mountains. While Ming chronicles claimed this frontier region as part of Ming imperial domains, operational control was largely confined to garrison towns and strategic passes, leaving most of the region under native chieftains.[15] This administrative condition highlights the frontier's dual nature: It was cartographically included in the Ming empire, but was beyond direct imperial governance in reality.

15. The Ming reluctance to engage in direct territorial administration stands in stark contrasts to the Qing dynasty's later incorporation of western Sichuan into the provincial administrative framework. For early Qing geopolitics in western Sichuan, see Dai, *Sichuan Frontier and Tibet*.

Dongbuhanhu and Zagu, two indigenous polities recognized as native chieftains by the Ming bureaucracy, were protagonists that shaped regional geopolitics on the fifteenth-century Sichuan-Tibetan frontier. Although Dongbuhanhu exerted greater pressure on the empire, this polity was not initially a major concern due to its remoteness from direct Ming control.[16] In the early Ming, Dongbuhanhu development was significantly affected by its geographical isolation. Landlocked by rugged terrain, the native chieftaincy's external contacts with neighboring polities and the broader world depended heavily on access to important but precarious transportation routes through the mountainous Sichuan-Tibetan frontier. Consequently, Dongbuhanhu's earliest mention in Ming documents is tied to an incident involving roadblocks. In 1411, armed conflict erupted between two neighboring polities to the south of Dongbuhanhu, effectively blocking its access to the major Sichuan-Tibetan route that linked the native chieftaincy to Yazhou.[17] While this

16. From the late Ming dynasty to the early twentieth century, scholars offered a range of hypotheses concerning the origins of Dongbuhanhu's ruling house. Cao Xuequan, a late Ming scholar-official, posited that Dongbuhanhu descended from Meng Huo, a figure from the third-century Three Kingdoms period. Ren Naiqiang proposed that Dongbuhanhu's lineage could be dated back to the Qiang people in the Han dynasty, while Ma Changshou suggests that Dongbuhanhu should have originated from Tibetans who migrated eastward during the tenth century. The etymology of the name Dongbuhanhu itself also remains contested. One widely circulated explanation that is recognized by local government suggests that the name is a composite of four surnames: Dong, Bu, Han, and Hu. However, this theory lacks support from historical sources and appears speculative. Nor does the Tibetan transcription provide decisive clarity. In Tibetan, Dongbuhanhu is recorded as *stong sde nam mkha'*, in which *stong sde* means "the general who commands one thousand soldiers" and *nam mkha'* refers to the sky or heaven. Yet the phonetic divergence between *stong sde nam mkha'* and Dongbuhanhu indicates that this is likely a retrospective Tibetanization, interpreting the name as "the heavenly general who commands one thousand soldiers." I am indebted to Christopher Atwood for suggesting that the first two syllables, *Dongbu*, may derive from *stong-bu-chung*, a Tibetan term meaning "petty chiliarch," a Yuan military-administrative title. It is plausible that this title was originally granted to Leduo, the figure who submitted tribute to the Ming court on behalf of Jinchuan. In contrast, the meaning of *Hanhu* remains obscure. Local scholars suggests that it is an indigenous term referring to "a vast space that thousands of people dwell." However, in the absence of corroborating historical evidence, the interpretation of *Hanhu* remains inconclusive. See Cao, *Shuzhong guangji*, 339; Ren, *Sichuan shanggushi chutan*, 167; Ma, "Jiaring minzu shehui shi," in *Ma Changshou minzu xue lunji*, 140–153; Huang, "Muping Tusi Xiongmao gucheng de lishi jiyi."

17. *Ming shilu*, Taizong *juan* 115, Yongle 9/5/*yiyou*, 1474.

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route facilitated transregional trade, it was also the primary conduit through which polities in the plateau and the Sichuan-Tibetan frontier region participated in the Ming tributary system. Access to this system was crucial for Dongbuhanhu. Therefore, the armed conflict and the ensuing loss of the passageway undoubtedly caused concern for Namkha (Nan'ge 喃葛), the leader of Dongbuhanhu, who proactively petitioned the Ming court to resolve the blockade through military intervention. The Ming refused his request, as launching a military campaign to clear transport routes for a native chieftaincy on the empire's westernmost frontier was of little interest to the court. It is clear that Dongbuhanhu's geographical and political remoteness afforded it great autonomy but also discouraged direct Ming involvement in frontier affairs.

Native chieftaincies along the Sichuan-Tibetan frontier regarded the Ming as a valuable political and economic resource. In Namkha's case, although the Ming emperor did not respond to his initial request, constant interaction with the court still proved beneficial. When the Dongbuhanhu envoy approached the Ming court regarding the roadblock incident in 1411, Namkha was still referred to as a local headman (*toumu* 頭目), a title with limited political or military significance. But by 1415 Namkha had already been promoted to grand pacification commissioner (3B), a position of notable prominence within the Ming bureaucratic system.[18]

Such political interactions had important implications for both the Ming and the frontier polities. For the former, conferring various titles upon frontier leaders was a crucial aspect of the tributary system, as it aligned with the court's strategy to secure loyalty through vassal relationships.[19] For the latter, the Ming's political support served as an important tool to bolster regional authority. It is important to note that many native chieftains on the Sichuan-Tibetan frontier first acquired official titles, seals, and letter-patents—symbols of political legitimacy and capital—under Mongol suzerainty.[20] Dongbuhanhu was no exception. One entry from *Yazhou fuzhi* 雅州府志, the first local gazetteer of the Yazhou region, compiled during the Qianlong era, indicates that Dongbuhanhu was a mere subordinate polity of Jinchuan until its leader

18. *Ming shilu*, Taizong *juan* 165, Yongle13/6/*xinmao*, 1856.

19. Greatrex, "Tribute Missions from the Sichuan Borderlands to the Imperial Court," 82.

20. Petech, "Yuan Organization of the Tibetan Border Areas."

traveled to the Yuan court to pay tribute and returned with a seal, when the polity became an independent tributary to the Mongols.[21] In this regard, the Ming's political recognition was a re-approval of its local authority after the dynamic change.

For Dongbuhanhu, endorsement from the Ming emperor was a valuable form of political capital. On the one hand, once native chieftains had acquired high-ranking titles from the Ming, they were justified in exerting influence over the domestic politics of other polities. This principle was also quite clear in fifteenth-century central Tibet: When nobles and hierarchs acquired lofty titles from the court, they had the power to intervene in territorial and jurisdictional disputes among lower-ranking title holders and manipulate the domestic politics of other polities.[22] On the other hand, the conferral of prestigious official titles to frontier tributaries could reinforce preexisting hierarchical relationships within frontier society. For example, Biesizhai 別思寨 was one of several subordinate polities under Dongbuhanhu's authority, functioning as a strategic buffer zone against Zagu in the northeast. Namkha appointed one of his most trusted military commanders to govern this critical polity on his behalf—an arrangement suggestive of the quasi-feudal principles across the frontier. While the Ming court still addressed Namkha as a headman, the leader of Biesizhai was designated as hamlet head (*touren* 頭人)—a hereditary title for those who ruled a small territory but did not receive imperial court ranks and titles.[23] Yet after Namkha received the 3B rank of grand pacification commissioner, Biesizhai's leader was elevated to the status of pacification commissioner (*anfushi* 安撫使), a 5B title.[24]

Understanding the power that followed imperial recognition, native chieftains actively sought Ming recognition to construct and consolidate their local authority. Nonetheless, Ming endorsement was only an external source of legitimacy for frontier polities. Indigenous ideologies of rulership, such as religion, also played an important, probably even more decisive, role in frontier geopolitics.

21. Cao and Cao, *Yazhou fuzhi*, 559.
22. Schwieger, "Significance of Ming Titles Conferred upon the Phag Mo Gru Rulers," 326.
23. Chen, *Sichuan Lixian Zangzu tusi zhidu xia de shehui*, 365.
24. *Ming shilu*, Xuanzong *juan* 5, Xuande 10/5/*gengyin*, 109.

The Rise of a Bön Patron in the 1430s

Religion played a fundamental role in consolidating authority on the Sichuan-Tibetan frontier. Both Dongbuhanhu and Zagu were theocratic polities. Whereas Zagu leaders were devout patrons of Tibetan Buddhism, Dongbuhanhu leaders explicitly integrated the indigenous Tibetan religion of Bön into their efforts to build legitimacy.[25] Although Bön is often known for its conflicts with Tibetan Buddhists in northwest Sichuan in the eighteenth century, it was already widespread across the frontier and maintained a tense relationship with Tibetan Buddhism during the Ming period.[26] Tibetologists have documented early fifteenth-century Tibetan Buddhist victories over Bön adherents, but Bön forces generally enjoyed greater popularity in the region.[27] This influence led local Tibetan Buddhist monasteries to incorporate many elements of Bön in their interior and exterior designs,[28] and even the author of *mDo smad chos 'byung* (*Religious History of Amdo*), one of the most important chronicles of Buddhism in eastern Tibet compiled during the Qing, recognized the region as a spiritual realm of Bön.[29]

Dongbuhanhu took Bön as an ideological vehicle of its political authority. During Namkha's 1415 tributary mission, when he was granted the rank of grand pacification commissioner, the Ming court had already acknowledged his religious authority within the local Bön (*benjiao* 苯教) community.[30] In 1430, shortly before his retirement, Namkha strategically used another tribute mission to secure imperial approval for his succession: His first son, Panden Yeshe (Bandan Yeshi 班丹也失), was appointed to oversee Dongbuhanhu's religious population, and his second son, Gelek Gyaltsen, was designated to govern the civilian population.[31]

The support of Bön practitioners offered a strategic advantage for many native chieftaincies. Recognizing this rationale, Dongbuhanhu's

25. The early development of Bön is still debatable. While many scholars believe that the origins of Bön predate the introduction of Buddhism from India, others argue that it began to take shape only in the eleventh century. Schaik, *Tibet*, 99.

26. Karmay, *Feast of the Morning Light*, 2.

27. Sperling, "Tibetan Buddhism, Perceived and Imagined," 160–61.

28. Zou, *Ming-Qing Jiarong Zangzu tusi guanxi yanjiu*, 105–6.

29. Zhiguanba, *Anduo zhengjiaoshi*, 726.

30. *Ming shilu*, Taizong *juan* 165, Yongle 13/6/*xinmao*, 1856.

31. *Ming shilu*, Xuanzong *juan* 71, Xuande/5/10/*yisi*, 1655.

major step in its initial push to expand was to incorporate Gyalrong, a region revered across eastern Tibet as a sacred Bön stronghold.[32] Gyalrong's religious significance is closely associated with Mount Murdo (Mo'erduo 墨爾多), a sacred mountain in Bön cosmology that lies at the spiritual center of the region.[33] Even Tibetan Buddhists acknowledged Mount Murdo's divine connotation. A fifteenth-century hagiography from the Sakya sect of Tibetan Buddhist, for example, describes Mount Murdo as a sacred site inhabited by both deities and malevolent spirits.[34] Thus, control over Gyalrong—and, by extension, Mount Murdo—conferred considerable religious prestige among Bön communities to frontier powers.

Whether Dongbuhanhu subdued Gyalrong through military intervention or politico-religious strategies remains uncertain, but the process can be inferred by examining how a specific religious title changed hands in the early fifteenth century.[35] In 1425, Dorje Gyaltsen (Duoerzhi Jianzang 朵兒只監藏), a Bön master from Gyalrong who held the esteemed title of State Preceptor of Sublime Wisdom and Supernormal Awakening (*Miaozhi tongwu guoshi* 妙智通悟國師), paid tribute at the Ming court.[36] On two occasions, in 1427 and 1429, he is also recorded as having sent his successor, Sakya Gyaltsen (Shixia Jianzang 釋夏監藏), to Beijing.[37] By 1434, Sakya Gyaltsen had already inherited the state preceptor title,[38] and he also began sending his own successor to the Ming court. However, when Sakya Gyaltsen is next mentioned in Ming court records, in 1439, he is referred to not as a state preceptor, but rather as an

32. Although rGyal-Rong (Gyalrong) is commonly used to refer to a vast region in eastern Kham / western Sichuan, in the Ming dynasty, it was still a designation with narrow reference that points to a specific political entity. Zou, *Ming-Qing jiarong zangzu tusi guanxi yanjiu*, 7–22.

33. Although the large-scale cultural construction of Mount Murdo's sacred status primarily took place in the eighteenth century, it had already gained recognition as a prominent religious landscape by the fifteenth century, supported by the production of rich religious texts and pilgrimage guides. See Karmay, "Cult of Mount Murdo in Gyalrong."

34. Maoergai sangmudan, "Zangzu shi qile mingjing," 386.

35. Greatrex, "Tribute Missions from the Sichuan Borderlands to the Imperial Court," 90–91.

36. *Ming shilu*, Renzong *juan* 8, Hongxi 1/3/*xinmao*, 262.

37. *Ming shilu*, Xuanzong *juan* 28, Xuande 2/5/*bingwu*, 733; *juan* 55, Xuande 4/6/*yimao*, 1308.

38. *Ming shilu*, Xuanzong *juan* 112, Xuande 9/9/*gengchen*, 2532.

apprentice to the late state preceptor Dorje Gyaltsen.[39] This suggests that, by this time, Sakya Gyaltsen had been stripped of his State Preceptor title—an implication supported by the fact that one year earlier, Panden Yeshe, the religious leader of Dongbuhanhu, had acquired the title of "State Preceptor of Sublime Wisdom and Supernormal Awakening."[40] In other words, Dongbuhanhu had effectively appropriated control over this highly revered role within Bön tradition by the late 1430s. When Sakya Gyaltsen petitioned the Ming court to reinstate his title, his plea was ultimately rejected.[41]

With Gyalrong under its control and its religious authority firmly established, Dongbuhanhu expanded its religious and territorial influence with ease. In 1440, the polity engaged in religious conflicts with various Tibetan Buddhist communities.[42] In 1444, it subjugated the Bön-supporting groups in Khro-skyab.[43] Meanwhile, Dongbuhanhu forged an alliance with Shangba 商巴, a powerful Bön community located south of Songpan on the Sichuan-Tibetan frontier. Shangba's influence was so formidable that even the Ming hesitated to confront it directly. In a skirmish in 1440, the Ming military apprehended the Shangba religious leader, who allegedly incited raids on imperial grain caravans and besieged fortresses. In retaliation for his arrest, Bön followers seized mountain passes, obstructed routes, and destroyed numerous Ming fortresses and postal stations.[44] Despite urgent appeals from local military officers to quell the unrest, the Ming court instead executed the top commander of the Songpan military and exiled his deputy. At the court's request, the Shangba Bön leader was released and even granted the honorary title of state preceptor as a conciliatory gesture.[45] By establishing cooperative relationships with religious forces like Shangba, Dongbuhanhu bolstered its authority within frontier society.

As Dongbuhanhu expanded its influence through military conquest and religious propagation, Zagu followed a similar trajectory by adopting Tibetan Buddhism as its preferred religious force. In 1431, the Zagu ruler

39. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 54, Zhengtong 4/4/*yiyou*, 1037.
40. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 38, Zhengtong 3/1/*dingyou*, 735.
41. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 55, Zhengtong 4/5/*yimao*, 1051–52.
42. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 70, Zhengtong 5/8/*wuyin*, 1353.
43. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 122, Zhengtong 9/10/*renzi*, 2445–46.
44. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 62, Zhengtong 4/12/*dingchou*, 1174–75.
45. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 66, Zhengtong 5/4/*bingxu*, 1270.

assassinated the leader of a neighboring polity and forcibly annexed its territory; in the following year, he again invaded several strategically important hamlets.[46] In 1441, Zagu dispatched a Tibetan Buddhist monk to be its persuader, and the monk successfully secured the submission of four additional hamlets.[47] Numerous new monasteries were established within Zagu's domain, underscoring the crucial role of Tibetan Buddhism in consolidating Zagu's political authority.[48]

Although nearly all primary sources concerning the fifteenth-century Sichuan-Tibetan frontier are official Ming court records and hence, by nature, emphasized the necessity of Ming approval for frontier leaders' authority, it is nonetheless clear that imperial recognition was not the sole source of legitimacy for frontier polities. Dongbuhanhu's early influence developed from the combination of Ming political recognition and indigenous norms of authority-building, particularly those drawn from religious traditions.[49] While it is difficult to determine which source of authority offered greater legitimacy, local interests were unquestionably fundamental in frontier politics.

Competition in a Binary World

As Dongbuhanhu and Zagu expanded in the 1430s, the geopolitical situation on the Ming's western frontier became increasingly complex. In response, the Ming adopted a strategy of supporting the weaker side to maintain regional balance. One court official explained this approach: "Zagu was situated between Dongbuhanhu and the Ming-controlled jurisdictions of Weizhou and Baoxian. As the relatively weaker party, Zagu had to rely on Weizhou and Baoxian to contend with Dongbuhanhu; although Dongbuhanhu was strong, its access to Weizhou

46. *Ming shilu*, Xuanzong *juan* 82, Zhengtong 6/8/*bingwu*, 1900; Yu, *Yu Qian ji*, 143.

47. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 76, Zhengtong 6/2/*renwu*, 1493–94.

48. Yuan, *Quanshu bianyu kao*, 96.

49. In Ming and Qing southwest frontier regions, the introduction of imperial forces, be it military or ideological, did not lead to simple patterns of incorporation and assimilation, but more often created a hybrid culture. Patterson Giersch identifies a similar scenario in Tai domains of Qing dynasty Yunnan frontier. In this politically fluid borderland, the penetration of Qing imperial force, Han migrants, and indigenous customs converged, forming what Giersch designates as a "middle ground" where patterns of acculturation were multidirectional. See Giersch, *Asian Borderlands*, 3–7.

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and Baoxian was blocked by Zagu."[50] Following this rationale, in the 1440s, the Ming court leaned toward supporting Zagu to suppress the rising power of Dongbuhanhu.

Despite being the relatively weaker side, Zagu held a significant geopolitical advantage that Dongbuhanhu desperately sought: It was strategically better positioned and hence able to control the tributary routes connecting northwest Sichuan to the Chengdu Plain. In 1432, Zagu made an important move to halt Dongbuhanhu's outward access. By seizing control of six hamlets locating along a key mountain pass, Zagu effectively blocked Dongbuhanhu's ability to send tribute missions to Beijing.[51]

During the 1440s, the rivalry between Dongbuhanhu and Zagu continued to center around control over trade routes. In 1441, Zagu disrupted Dongbuhanhu's tributary mission by felling numerous trees along a critical mountain trail. Although the envoys eventually reached the Ming office, the two hundred tributary horses they brought with them were forcibly detained within Zagu territory.[52] Despite assuring that the conflict would be addressed, the Ming administration took insufficient action, as by the following year Dongbuhanhu still found itself in urgent need of a viable eastward passageway to pay tribute.[53]

As these events unfolded, the de facto ruler of Dongbuhanhu was the young and ambitious Gelek Gyaltsen. Initially, Gelek Gyaltsen hoped to resolve the obstruction incidents through diplomatic channels. He sought mediation from the Ming, just as his father Namkha had done in 1411, but once again received a disappointing result. When Gelek Gyaltsen submitted his 1442 report requesting the opening of a new route through Zagu territory after the existing ones had been severed, the Ming refused to intervene.[54] In 1443, Zagu once again blocked the road and prevented Dongbuhanhu from presenting tribute.[55]

Gelek Gyaltsen's failure to garner support from the Ming can be attributed to the divergent expectations between the two parties. Gelek Gyaltsen viewed the establishment of functional routes as a means to access the Ming realm and engage in a lucrative trans-regional

50. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 171, Zhengtong 13/10/ *yisi*, 3295–96.
51. Yu, *Yu Qian ji*, 143.
52. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 81, Zhengtong 6/7/ *yiyou*, 1624.
53. Yu, *Yu Qian ji*, 143–44.
54. Yu, *Yu Qian ji*, 144.
55. Yu, *Yu Qian ji*, 144.

commercial network. In this regard, what Zagu's actions impeded was Dongbuhanhu's access to wealth. In contrast, the Ming court was more concerned with the political symbolism associated with the arrival of Dongbuhanhu envoys: After submitting to the Ming's celestial authority, a native chieftain was expected to dispatch envoys to pay tribute periodically. Since Dongbuhanhu envoys had successfully reached the court in 1441 and 1442 despite the obstacles they claimed to have faced, there seemed to be no compelling reason for the Ming to get involved in a conflict or open a new route in the distant frontier.[56] Both sides acted on their own understanding of their mutual relations, yet Gelek Gyaltsen evidently overestimated Dongbuhanhu's political importance to the Ming.

Accordingly, Dongbuhanhu found itself isolated in the struggle with Zagu. In response, the polity began to forge its own military-political alliances to strengthen its position in the region. In the mountainous Sichuan-Tibetan frontier, inhabitants were inclined to find allies to overcome rivalries, and the principle of alliance was based on social distinction. Qi Quan 祁全, a Ming interpreter dispatched to western Sichuan in 1411, observed this process:

> Upon my arrival, I observed that in settlements such as Qiming hamlet in Songpan, the local communities maintain distinctions between big clans (*daxing* 大姓) and small clans (*xiaoxing* 小姓), as well as divisions between Buddhist teachings (*Sengjiao* 僧教) and Bön traditions (*Daojiao* 道教). For instance, State Preceptor Lodro Gyeltsen of Shangba belonged to the Bön tradition and represents the small clans, while Chan Master Chuoling 綽領 (of *Liba* 離八) and others adhered to Buddhism and represent the big clans. These groups maintain separate jurisdictions without mutual interference. In recent years, Shangba has engaged in territorial disputes with Liba, mobilizing local communities to pursue vendettas. These conflicts have been exploited to plunder military and civilian resources and livestock, resulting in border turbulence and repeated military actions. This situation has proven highly detrimental to regional stability.[57]

56. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 95, Zhengtong 7/8/*yiwei*, 1908.

57. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 80, Zhengtong 6/6/ *dingchou*, 1590–91. While Buddhism in the memorial generally means Tibetan Buddhism, *Daojiao*, according to Zou Libo, refers to Bön, and *Daoshi* was the designation for Bön practitioners. Zou argues that such equations

The value of Qi Quan's memorial lies in its detailed ethnographic description of early 1440s Sichuan-Tibetan frontier society. According to Qi's observations, local society was organized by a binary social structure whereby big clans were typically Tibetan Buddhist practitioners and small clans adhered to Bön traditions. Historical anthropologists have argued that this clear sense of the "Self" and the "Other" stemmed from the intensity of interpersonal relationships in a resource-poor region where mutual competition was a social norm.[58] The relationships between social groups on the Sichuan-Tibetan frontier were dynamic. In times of peace, self-other distinctions had little practical effect as members of different groups lived interspersed among the mountains, maintained intermarriages, and even cooperated occasionally in fighting common enemies.[59] But when tensions erupted, binary social categorizations became a decisive factor in forming alliances.

Knowing the tension between big clan and small clan groups and how it could lead to frontier disorder, the Ming sought to manage these complex social relations by striking a balance. For instance, regarding the social conflict between Shangba and Liba reported by Qi Quan, the Ming response was to elevate Chuoling, the Liba leader, from Chan master to state preceptor, a title equivalent to that of Lodro Gyeltsen of Shangba, in order to balance the geopolitical power dynamic.[60] A similar logic is evident in the Ming's response to the Dong Min 董敏–Wang Yong 王永 vendetta, where, rather than supporting Dongbuhanhu, the Ming once again chose to support Zagu, the weaker side.

The blood feud between Dong Min and Wang Yong, two powerful figures in frontier society, exemplifies the frontier region's binary power pattern in which both Dongbuhanhu and Zagu played pivotal roles. The extended conflict began with a drunken skirmish. In 1443, the Ming court appointed Dong as the chief of Baozi Pass (Baozi guan 保子關), a strategically important point along a mountain route. Wang attended the banquet to congratulate Dong on his promotion. However, after several rounds of drinking, a violent confrontation occurred, and Wang

were likely drawn from Ming officials' understanding of some common features in Bön and Daoism. See Zou, *Ming-Qing Jiarong Zangzu tusi guanxi yanjiu*, 140–65.

58. Wang, *Qiang zai Han-Zang zhi jian*, 52.

59. Guo, *Wei-Mao Bianfang Jishi*, 11:31a.

60. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 80, Zhengtong 6/6/*dingchou*, 1591.

Yong brutally murdered Dong Min's son and more than two dozen other members of his family.[61] While Dong Min managed to escape the massacre, Wang Yong seized the chance to take control of Baozi Pass.[62]

Shortly after committing this heinous act against Dong Min's family, Wang Yong devised a similar plot to occupy Hanshui Pass (Hanshui guan 寒水關). In 1443, Wang persuaded Jiawu 加悟, the leader of Caopo 草坡 hamlet, to launch a strategic attack on Hanshui Pass, leading to the death of the pass chief and more than five hundred lineage members and subordinates. After the massacre, Jiawu sought refuge in Zagu's domain, requesting protection from the Zagu ruler, and handed over the official seal of Hanshui Pass.[63] These two instances of bloodshed were not random events. They were carefully orchestrated by the Zagu faction against those who allied with Dongbuhanhu: Dong Min, like Dongbuhanhu, belonged to the small clan group, while Wang Yong was a member of the big clan group, similar to Zagu.[64] After these violent events, the Zagu faction successfully gained control over significant transit points in the mountainous region at the expense of its rivals.

Despite promptly receiving reports of these atrocities, the Ming eventually granted Wang Yong a pardon when he sent his nephew to Beijing to plead guilty in 1443.[65] In 1444, Jiawu was also absolved after the Zagu ruler advocated for him during a tributary mission.[66] Ironically, it was Dong Min—the aggrieved party in the feud—who appeared on the Ming's wanted list due to his refusal to abandon his pursuit of revenge.[67] The Ming military apprehended Dong Min in 1477.[68] In much the same way that the Zagu ruler had done for Jiawu, Gelek Gyaltsen submitted a memorial to the Ming court to plead for clemency for Dong Min. His plea was rejected, however, as Ming authorities executed Dong Min later that year.[69] While this outcome may seem unfair to Dong Min, the

61. Guo, *Wei-Mao bianfang jishi*, 11:32a; *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 270, Jingtai 7/9/*guiyou*, 5721.

62. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 107, Zhengtong 8/8/*yiyou*, 2177.

63. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 121, Zhengtong 9/9/*renyin*, 2440.

64. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 122, Zhengtong 9/10/*dingsi*, 2447–48.

65. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 109, Zhengtong 8/10/*jiashen*, 2201.

66. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 121, Zhengtong 9/9/*renyin*, 2440.

67. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 126, Zhengtong 10/2/*bingyin*, 2524.

68. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 152, Zhengtong 12/4/*yiwei*, 2974.

69. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 157, Zhengtong 12/8/*xinwei*, 3057.

Ming's strategy was clear: Since the Zagu faction was the weaker party in competition with Dongbuhanhu, the court would support Zagu to maintain the local power balance whenever it intervened in the conflict.

In the geopolitical rivalry of the 1440s, the Zagu faction emerged as the clear victor over Dongbuhanhu. This shift is evidenced by tributary data: While Dongbuhanhu averaged only 0.8 emissaries to Beijing per year during the 1440s, Zagu sent four groups of envoys to the Ming court in 1447 alone. This growing power imbalance also led to internal fractures within the Dongbuhanhu faction. As Zagu gained prominence, doubts began to surface among Dongbuhanhu's long-standing allies, including the ruler of Biesizhai hamlet. Not only did the Biesizhai ruler forge an official seal and falsely claim a rank equivalent to that of Dongbuhanhu's leader (3B), but he also allied with Zagu and launched attacks against Dongbuhanhu communities. These actions constituted a direct challenge to Dongbuhanhu's authority and undoubtedly provoked the ire of Gelek Gyaltsen. In response, Gelek Gyaltsen apprehended the Biesizhai ruler, uncovered the forged seal, and ultimately had the ruler's eyes gouged out as retribution for his betrayal.[70] This brutal punishment underscores Gelek Gyaltsen's outrage over Zagu's ascendancy, and all he could do was wait for an opportunity to strike back.

Every Mountain King Has His Day

Facing Zagu's ascendence in the 1440s, Gelek Gyaltsen must have felt frustrated. Thus, when turmoil erupted within Zagu, he seized the moment with a bold but calculated response. In 1448, the concubine of the Zagu ruler fatally poisoned both the ruler and his son, the designated successor.[71] In addition, the newly appointed Zagu regent proved inept, not only alienating several subordinate leaders but also failing to prevent their defection to Dongbuhanhu.[72] Sensing an opportunity, Gelek Gyaltsen acted swiftly. In a memorial sent to the Ming court, he announced his ambitions: "Now, we have prepared horses and local goods as tributary gifts and are about to set off. We are going to open up

70. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 132, Zhengtong 10/8/*renyin*, 2617.
71. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 171, Zhengtong 13/10/*yisi*, 3295.
72. Yu, *Yu Qian ji*, 144.

a new route through the Zagu mountains. Please arrange officials and our escorts to wait on the other side."[73]

The purported opening of new routes through the mountains within Zagu domain, as a Ming official later observed, was a pretext for invasion.[74] Between 1448 and 1449, Gelek Gyaltsen launched a series of raids, annexing a substantial swath of Zagu territory.[75] Zagu sought the Ming's support through diplomatic channels, yet its efforts failed. At the time, the Ming court was preoccupied with more pressing military concerns, mired in the Luchuan-Pingmian campaign against the Shan-led state of Möng Mao.[76]

The tributary mission of 1448 marked a turning point in the triangular relationship between the Ming, Zagu, and Dongbuhanhu. At the end of that year, Zagu dispatched a monk named Nan'gezang 南哥藏 to Beijing. According to court records, the monk's arrival was formally registered as a tributary act, and the items he presented—swords and armor—were documented as official gifts. However, upon receiving Nan'gezang and his offerings, the Ming reception official made a disparaging remark. Dismissing the tributary items as worthless, the Ming official characterized Zagu as a mere opportunist attempting to exchange scrap metal for valuable court rewards. As a result, the Ming court sharply reduced the amount of return rewards and publicly reprimanded Nan'gezang. Deeply offended, the monk refused to kneel to accept the diminished rewards, and was ultimately imprisoned for insulting the emperor.[77]

The Ming's understanding of gift exchange with tributary delegations did not always align with those of the envoys. In court records, nearly all foreign and frontier visitors were classified as tributary envoys, and their arrival was interpreted as a symbolic act of submission to imperial authority. Within this framework, Nan'gezang's actions—presenting

73. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 171, Zhengtong 13/10/*yisi*, 3295.

74. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 171, Zhengtong 13/10/*yisi*, 3295.

75. Yu, *Yu Qian ji*, 144.

76. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 171, Zhengtong 13/10/*yisi*, 3296. On the Luchuan campaign and the narrative of the campaign in Chinese historiography, see Twitchett and Grimm, "Cheng-T'ung, Ching-T'ai and T'ien-Shun Reigns," 314–16; Liew, "Luchuan-Pingmian Campaigns."

77. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 172, Zhengtong 13/11/*bingwu*, 3316; *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 180, Zhengtong 14/7/*yimao*, 2965.

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substandard tribute and behaving defiantly—were framed as greed and insolence, reinforcing the Ming court's narrative of righteous authority. Yet this Ming-centric perspective risks obscuring the complexities of cross-regional relations. Peter Schwieger, through his examination of Tibetan-language sources documenting interactions with the Ming and Qing central governments, convincingly demonstrates that Tibetans seldom used the word *dpya* ("tribute") to describe their interactions with the Beijing-based courts despite the frequent appearance of Chinese terms for "tribute" in Chinese imperial records.[78] This discrepancy suggests that Tibetans, like other participants in the tributary system, likely held alternative understandings of their putative tributary interactions with the Ming court: understandings not captured by the Sinocentric diplomatic lexicon.

Nan'gezang's journey, the gifts he presented, and his confrontation with the Ming court must be understood within the broader context of Sichuan-Tibetan frontier society. The timing and geopolitical circumstances are particularly significant: Nan'gezang arrived at the Ming court in 1448, shortly after the assassination of the Zagu leader and during the height of Dongbuhanhu's aggressive campaign. Given the specific geopolitical circumstance and Zagu's long-standing dependence on Ming support in its competition with Dongbuhanhu, it is highly unlikely that Nan'gezang would have carried negligible or insincere offerings to Beijing.

The cultural connotation of the swords and armor Nan'gezang presented as tribute further suggests the wrongful nature of his imprisonment. These seemingly unconventional "tributary gifts" deviated from standard tribute items such as horses, Buddhist statues, or spices; moreover, they were not locally produced, as historical records indicate that the swords and armor were originally manufactured by the Ming. From the perspective of Ming officials, such offerings were dismissed as worthless scrap metal, an attempt by frontier opportunists to deceive the court in exchange for valuable rewards. Within the Sichuan-Tibetan frontier context, however, swords and armor symbolized alliances, loyalty, and the desire for peaceful submission and diplomatic dialogue. For instance, when Jiawu sought clemency for his role in the massacre at the Hanshui mountain pass in 1443, he offered six suits of iron armor to

78. Schwieger, "Tibetan Hierarchs and the Qing Emperor," 37.

the Ming court as a gesture of remorse.[79] Similarly, when Gelek Gyaltsen attempted to forge an alliance with the Ming in 1452, he dispatched envoys bearing arms as tokens of his sincerity.[80]

Considered in this light, Nan'gezang's actions were far from irreverent; he brought what was, in his society, one of the most significant and appropriate tokens at a moment when Zagu was in urgent need of Ming support. Conceivably, the Ming court simply failed to decipher this political message and therefore accused Zagu of insincerity. It is also possible that the Ming court ignored this gesture based on its judgment of the geopolitical situation. A similar instance occurred in 1449, when a Sichuan official—presumably familiar with Tibetan culture and frontier affairs—made scornful remarks about Buddhist statues and Buddhist relics by dismissing them as worthless scrap.[81] Yet in a deeply Buddhist society like Tibet, such religious items held immense value. Even the fine fabrics and silks received from the Ming court were repurposed into large *thangka* paintings for ritual use or incorporated into the materials used to create Buddha statues.[82] These examples underscore that so-called tributary interactions could hold vastly different meanings for either side. While Ming officials evaluated tribute primarily in terms of material or economic value, for Zagu, the reduction in court rewards at such a politically precarious moment signaled a rupture in what had been a long-standing relationship of trust. This helps explain Nan'gezang's strong reaction. As a result of this failed diplomatic mission, Zagu gradually withdrew from its rivalry with Dongbuhanhu.

As the rise of Zagu came to an abrupt halt in the late 1440s, Gelek Gyaltsen pressed forward. In 1450, he sought to dispatch a delegation to Beijing, sending horses, swords, and armor as tribute. While horses were conventional tribute from the Sichuan-Tibetan frontier, swords and armor likely served as conciliatory gifts intended to appease the court's anger. When Ming officials in Sichuan rejected Dongbuhanhu's delegation as punishment for Gelek Gyaltsen's recent escapades, he remained undeterred.[83] Gelek Gyaltsen sent another tributary delegation

79. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 151, Zhengtong 12/3/*wuyin*, 2965.
80. Yu, *Yu Qian ji*, 419–20.
81. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 177, Zhengtong 14/4/*xinhai*, 3407–8.
82. Wu, "Mingdai sichou dui Zangqu de shuru jiqi yingxiang," 60.
83. Yu, *Yu Qian ji*, 144.

the following year. When Ming officials approached the envoys to reject them for a second time, the tribute bearers responded bluntly: "Alas! It is too late. The horses are already on their way."[84] This frank response indicated that Gelek Gyaltsen had already decided to disregard imperial regulations, confident that the Ming lacked the means to restrain him. Shortly after the horses entered Zagu territory, the bold envoy was killed, and the horses were forcibly returned to Dongbuhanhu. We do not know how or by whom the envoy was assassinated, but this incident prompted Gelek Gyaltsen to escalate his actions. Later that year, he commanded over two thousand soldiers to march into Zagu territory, ostensibly to escort a mere hundred tribute horses.[85] In this case, the act of going to Beijing to pay tribute provided Gelek Gyaltsen with a legitimate pretext to mobilize armed forces and invade neighboring polities.

Facing Gelek Gyaltsen's aggression during a period of political turmoil caused by the 1449 Tumu Incident, the Ming were compelled to adopt a conciliatory approach. The Ming emperor adopted a softer tone in edicts directed at Gelek Gyaltsen while repeatedly elevating Gelek Gyaltsen's rank and granting him numerous tribute rewards in exchange for peace on the frontier.[86] In 1452, the Ming made an offer to conditionally promote Gelek Gyaltsen to regional military commissioner-in-chief (2A) only if he could return the territories previously annexed from Zagu.[87] When Gelek Gyaltsen showed intention to comply, the Ming emperor expressed great satisfaction, even praising him as "the number one Cakravadaparvata guarding the empire's west."[88] The court also extended its preferential treatment to Dongbuhanhu's tributary delegations. Between 1452 and 1453, eight tributary embassies were sent from Dongbuhanhu to Beijing—an honor previously reserved for Zagu. Despite their rude behavior along the journey and frequent illegal activities, the Dongbuhanhu envoys were pardoned by the Ming emperor, who disregarded them as mere greedy barbarians seeking material benefits.[89]

84. Yu, *Yu Qian ji*, 144.

85. Yu, *Yu Qian ji*, 144.

86. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 195, Jingtai 1/8/*renshen*, 4109–10.

87. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 213, Jingtai 3/2/*dinghai*, 4591–92.

88. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 224, Jingtai 3/12/*gengzi*, 4866. The term "Cakravadaparvata" is a Buddhist concept referring to the iron-enclosed mountains that are believed to encircle the earth, forming the periphery that protects the world.

89. Yu, *Yu Qian ji*, 145.

Amidst the internal turmoil within the Zagu ruling group, Dongbuhanhu seized the opportunity to rise to power. Preoccupied by unrest on both its northern and southwestern frontiers, the Ming state was unable to effectively maintain geopolitical balance in the western regions. While previous studies of the tributary system have paid limited attention to material culture, the political significance of tribute goods in fact offers a valuable lens through which to examine the interactions between frontier chieftains and the Ming court. Although the Ming emperor viewed these chieftains merely as greedy barbarians, their role extended well beyond simple opportunism.

Frontier Ramifications of the Tributary System

As Dongbuhanhu rose to become the dominant power on the Sichuan-Tibetan frontier in the fifteenth century, it monopolized the tributary channel and amassed considerable wealth. This development alarmed many Ming officials, as it imposed a heavy financial burden on the court and placed significant pressure on the empire's western frontier defenses. In 1453, the Ming's grand coordinator and right censor-in-chief of Huguang reported on the misconduct of Dongbuhanhu's envoys.[90] In his memorial, the official accused these envoys of abusing their court privileges, stirring social unrest both in the frontier zone and in the Ming heartland, and hence implored the imperial court to strengthen regulations. Specifically, the document sheds light on three key aspects of Dongbuhanhu's involvement in the tributary system.

First, the memorial shows that Ming-frontier relations had begun to affect areas far beyond the frontier. It is noteworthy that the memorial was authored by an officer stationed far downstream along the Yangzi River in Huguang Province. Price variations in the tea trade provided the impetus for an official hundreds of miles away from the Sichuan-Tibetan frontier to report on the illicit behavior of Dongbuhanhu. During the mid-fifteenth century, tea prices were considerably lower in the mid-Yangzi region than on the Sichuan-Tibetan frontier.[91] Consequently, Tibetan tributary envoys returning from Beijing preferred to procure tea in this area, which was under the administration of the Huguang

90. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 232, Jingtai 4/8/*jiachen*, 5079–80.

91. Chen, *Ming-Qing Chuan-Zang chadao de shichang yu shehui*, 22.

region, rather than waiting until they reached the frontier. Despite the considerable distance between the mid-Yangzi region and Dongbuhanhu, logistical support for the tribute missions was fully covered by the Ming government, as a type of tributary privilege, hence freeing envoys from concerns over transport expenses. Given the large volume of goods they carried, it is reasonable to infer that the Dongbuhanhu envoys must have greatly inconvenienced local magistrates by repeatedly requesting labor forces, transportation, and other forms of logistics, ultimately provoking the Huguang official to lodge a formal complaint with the court.

Second, the memorial underscores that the disruptions caused by Dongbuhanhu tributary envoys had become a major concern for the Ming court. Their presence not only imposed a significant financial burden on the court and strained local labor resources, but also, in the memorialist's view, exerted a profound and detrimental impact on Ming subjects and their cultural environment. The official contended that because "the treacherous mountain regions were sparsely populated, and porters traveled and camped in the wilderness every day and night, the virtuous customs of Huaxia 華夏 civilization were being eroded by barbaric licentiousness."[92] He argued that the envoys' movements along the extensive Ming postal network threatened to contaminate Confucian cultural norms. Moreover, the memorial notes that the frequent passage of these envoys had corrupted populations living near the Sichuan-Tibetan frontier: Lured by the profits associated with tribute missions, frontier households began training their children in the envoys' languages so they could join the delegations as impostor monks or interpreters. As more Ming subjects in these frontier regions engaged in such illicit activities, potential taxpayers slipped beyond state oversight, gradually eroding the court's control over frontier affairs.

Third, the tributary system could facilitate interaction among multiple frontier communities. As noted in the memorial, to transport the large quantities of tea—often exceeding tens of thousands of catties—along with goods such as copper, tin, porcelain, and ironware, Dongbuhanhu envoys conscripted excessive laborers and boats first to ferry cargo to Chengdu by water and then to carry it overland. More than half of these porters were indigenous Bo-Yi 僰夷 people, and even women were enlisted to transport goods in difficult terrain. Throughout this process,

92. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 232, Jingtai/4/8/*jiachen*, 5079.

cross-ethnic communication was commonplace, and it is reasonable to infer that many Bo-Yi individuals also managed to join the tributary missions. Furthermore, presenting tribute in Beijing provided frontier leaders and agents with a legitimate reason to travel across the empire, and, more importantly, to engage with other tributaries, thereby expanding their social and political networks. In this regard, trans-regional contacts served to reinforce political alliances among various polities on the Sichuan-Tibetan frontier. This dynamic is also well illustrated by the case of Lazhong 蠟仲, a Dongbuhanhu spy.

The use of Ming official channels to forge social and political networks represented a frontier-specific adaptation of the tributary system. Prior to the departure of Dongbuhanhu's tributary envoys to Beijing in 1452, Lazhong, an underling of the Shangba leader, was tasked with delivering 120 horses to Dongbuhanhu. As a small clan community, Shangba was a close and influential ally of Dongbuhanhu. Lazhong's objective was to exploit Dongbuhanhu's official envoy status as a cover to present the horses as tribute and obtain imperial rewards. Assuming a false identity as an interpreter, Lazhong successfully presented the purported "tributary horses" to the Ming court and received substantial rewards as expected. On his return journey, he further used his assumed persona to gain access to a Ming prince's palace in Chengdu, but was ultimately apprehended while attempting to gather military intelligence. Under torture by the Ming military, Lazhong confessed that he had been operating as a spy and had used the tributary system to strengthen the alliance between Dongbuhanhu and Shangba for quite some time. At last, the Ming military executed Lazhong, forging his death certificate to avoid arousing Dongbuhanhu's suspicions.[93] This episode of covert exploitation of the tributary system by native chieftaincies was likely beyond anything the Ming court could have anticipated.[94]

93. Yu, *Yu Qian ji*, 435–39.

94. Frontier leaders were skilled at making political calculations regarding their interactions with imperial centers. David Faure argues that following the Qing dynasty's reform of "replacing the native official with the magistrate," a tendency emerged among *tusi* leaders to "create" foundational legends and genealogies to emphasize the connection between the origins of these *tusi* households and imperial endorsements. This phenomenon is described by Faure as "find an ancestor, connect to the state." Kim Seonmin also offers a Qing dynasty case of how the tributary relationship was negotiated in a frontier scenario. Focusing on ginseng, Kim identifies how this specific product became a political tool for Chosŏn Korea to preserve

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Facilitating interactions within the frontier social network, the tributary system also provided a model and material resources for Gelek Gyaltsen to construct a frontier version of the tributary system. In 1452, a Tibetan Buddhist monk, then serving as a Ming persuader, was traveling among frontier communities to encourage them to pay tribute to Beijing. The monk soon realized that many of those whom he had successfully convinced were intercepted en route by Dongbuhanhu envoys. These envoys promised local leaders gold and silver seals, as well as prestigious official titles, in exchange for redirecting their tribute payments from the Ming court to Dongbuhanhu. Additionally, subjects under their governance were promised four bolts of *sansuo* 三梭 cloth per person.[95]

This case underscores the wealth that Dongbuhanhu accumulated through its interactions with the Ming. *Sansuo* cloth—a high-quality fabric produced primarily in the Yangzi delta, the heart of Ming China's textile industry—was one of the key commodities in these exchanges. It is said that even the Ming emperors' underwear was made from *sansuo* cloth.[96] While Gelek Gyaltsen promised four bolts of *sansuo* cloth to those who allied with him, the Ming could offer only one bolt per person to those who rejected Dongbuhanhu's offer.[97] In this context, the Ming tributary system not only served as a geopolitical model for Gelek Gyaltsen to emulate and establish a hierarchical order in the frontier, but also provided him with the initial capital to build such a system. Because of its active participation in the tributary system and the Ming's preferential policies, Dongbuhanhu controlled a large supply that could be leveraged to garner support from frontier communities.

Dongbuhanhu clearly wished to monopolize access to the Ming, both politically and commercially. Yet, Gelek Gyaltsen did not merely copy the Ming model; he merged it with the dominant religious cosmology of the region. In 1452, an interpreter reported to the Ming court that Dongbuhanhu had dispatched an envoy to Asigong 阿思貢, another native chieftaincy in the Sichuan-Tibetan frontier. The envoy, bringing a set of

territorial boundaries and political relations with its suzerain power. While the tributary system provided a theoretical framework for East Asian diplomacy, how the geopolitical mechanism functioned varied across time and space. See Faure, "*Tusi* That Never Was"; Kim, *Ginseng and Borderland*.

95. Yu, *Yu Qian ji*, 213.

96. Chen, *Chen Zi quanji*, 307.

97. Yu, *Yu Qian ji*, 212–13.

armor and a helmet, sought to persuade the Asigong leader to convert from Tibetan Buddhism to Bön.[98] In exchange, Gelek Gyaltsen promised to establish a Bön monastery in Asigong and allocate the polity five hundred Bön monks.[99] This message not only highlights how armor and weapons were widely used as political tokens to forge alliances within frontier society, but also underscores that the creation of a religious coalition centered around Bön remained at the forefront of Gelek Gyaltsen's political agenda.

By the early 1450s, Gelek Gyaltsen had effectively neutralized the Zagu threat, while accumulating significant wealth through the Ming tributary system. He then embarked on his own authority-building project by combining elements of the Ming tributary system and indigenous Bön beliefs. The next and final move for Gelek Gyaltsen was to break through the physical and political barriers of the undulating mountains.

The War Never Waged

Although the Ming still perceived Gelek Gyaltsen as a rapacious barbarian driven by material gains from the tributary system, his ambitions had already expanded significantly. By the early 1450s, the Dongbuhanhu chieftain planned to invade the Sichuan plain, a region of paramount geopolitical importance and the most economically developed region in the empire's western territories. In 1452, Gelek Gyaltsen submitted a memorial to the Ming court expressing his desire for several canonical texts, including three of the Five Classics. He also requested two geographic guidebooks, *Fangyu shenglan* 方輿勝覽 (*Travelogue to Sites of Scenic Beauty*) and *Chengdu ji* 成都記 (*Records of Chengdu*), with the former offering historical and geographical information on nearly every county within the imperial realm and the latter serving as a comprehensive reference on Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan. Although Gelek Gyaltsen's request was presented with modesty and respect, it aroused suspicions among Ming officials. Since the Confucian classics were readily available in any bookstore in Beijing, Nanjing, or Chengdu, officials surmised that their inclusion was a mere cover for what

98. Yu, *Yu Qian ji*, 419.
99. Yu, *Yu Qian ji*, 414.

Gelek Gyaltsen truly sought: the two guidebooks containing valuable military-oriented geographical information about the Chengdu Plain.[100] Upon deducing his rebellious intentions, the Ming official declined Gelek Gyaltsen's request.

In addition to gathering geographical information about Ming territory, Gelek Gyaltsen also challenged Ming authority by reopening the Dong Min–Wang Yong case. Dissatisfied by the Ming's resolution of the dispute, Gelek Gyaltsen made a solemn promise to Dong Min's nephew that he would relentlessly pursue Wang Yong to seek justice.[101] This decision sparked significant consternation within the Ming court, as Gelek Gyaltsen openly questioned the Ming's role as the supposed ultimate arbiter of justice. Furthermore, the Dongbuhanhu leader's ambition to establish hegemony in frontier society is exemplified by his involvement in selecting a successor for Shangba. Upon the death of its former religious leader, Gelek Gyaltsen dutifully informed the Ming that he had already chosen a successor as Shangba's rightful heir.[102]

Tensions between the Ming and Dongbuhanhu also escalated over territorial disputes. Initially, the court sought to assert its overlord status by demanding that Gelek Gyaltsen return recently occupied Zagu territories. Gelek Gyaltsen complied with this request, returned the land, and received praise for his cooperation. However, it was later discovered that Gelek Gyaltsen had in fact withheld the seals of those regions, so that, while Zagu technically regained nominal rulership, Dongbuhanhu still retained political and jurisdictional control over the region. To further solidify his hold, Gelek Gyaltsen forcibly relocated the inhabitants of Zagu's territory to the deep mountains to prevent them from divulging strategic information to the Ming.[103]

In contrast to his handling of the Zagu territories, Gelek Gyaltsen adamantly refused to compromise over Old Weizhou (Jiu Weizhou 舊維州). From the Ming's perspective, Old Weizhou was of strategic importance in overseeing the Sichuan-Tibetan frontier. Prior to the 1450s, the Ming had granted Zagu indirect rule over the region, which was later taken over by Dongbuhanhu. This geopolitical change allowed

100. Yu, *Yu Qian ji*, 175–76.
101. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 229, Jingtai 4/5/*renshen*, 5009.
102. Yu, *Yu Qian ji*, 414.
103. Yu, *Yu Qian ji*, 175–76.

Dongbuhanhu to launch simultaneous attacks on Ming territory from four directions, hence greatly worrying the Ming. Yet when the court requested the return of Old Weizhou, Gelek Gyaltsen responded with an offensive tone:

> We acquired Old Weizhou from the Zagu people, not from you Han people. For nine days and nine nights, I struggled to understand this imperial edict. Old Weizhou is merely a small rocky mountain that can fit within a fist; it is best not to persist further. If you insist on reclaiming it, be prepared for a bloody war that could last one thousand years![104]

As Gelek Gyaltsen's assertive tone shows, his ambition and rejection of further Ming interference in regional affairs are evident, as is his apparent lack of fear of military confrontation. Faced with such determination, the Ming court instructed frontier officials to temporarily abandon their pursuit of Old Weizhou territory.[105]

The Ming did not passively wait for Dongbuhanhu's next move. In response to the imminent completion of Dongbuhanhu's watchtowers just outside Songpan's western gate and the escalating espionage activities targeting Ming military positions, the court began preparations for what seemed to be an inevitable war.[106] In 1452, the Ming attempted to weaken the Dongbuhanhu alliance by suppressing some of Gelek Gyaltsen's allies. At the same time, the court secured the support of Wang Yong, the long-standing adversary of Gelek Gyaltsen, who agreed to mount a flank attack on Dongbuhanhu once hostilities began.[107] Between 1453 and 1455, the Ming systematically deployed soldiers and resources to strategic locations, convened frequent military councils, made personnel arrangements, and quickly established a new battalion in Guanxian 灌縣, where officials anticipated Dongbuhanhu would launch its first attack.[108]

104. Yu, *Yu Qian ji*, 413.

105. Yu, *Yu Qian ji*, 214.

106. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 221, Jingtai 3/9/*renxu*, 4779.

107. Yu, *Yu Qian ji*, 414–15.

108. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 220, Jingtai 3/9/*gengyin*, 4745; *juan* 221, Jingtai 3/I9/*renxu*, 4779; *juan* 252, Jingtai 6/4/*gengzi*, 6518; *juan* 251, Jingtai 6/3/*gengsheng*, 5454; *juan* 255, Jingtai 6/I6/*yiyou*, 5496.

In the summer of 1455, following extensive preparations for Dongbuhanhu's anticipated invasion, the Ming court received reports of Gelek Gyaltsen's death. This unexpected news initially left even senior court officials skeptical, prompting them to quickly dispatch agents to verify its authenticity.[109] A few months later, a memorial arrived at court bearing Gelek Gyaltsen's name. Yet both its tone and title deviated from Gelek Gyaltsen's usual style, confirming the suspicion that something extraordinary had occurred in Dongbuhanhu and that Gelek Gyaltsen might indeed be deceased.[110] Historical records do not specify the cause of his death.

With Gelek Gyaltsen's passing, the military threat posed by Dongbuhanhu diminished. The turmoil on the Sichuan-Tibetan frontier that preceded his demise marked one of the most significant crises on the western periphery of the Ming empire; another comparable crisis would not arise until a century later when Mongols began to attack the Ming from the Qinghai-Sichuan steppe.[111] Ironically, it was largely due to the Sinocentric tributary system that this mid-fifteenth-century frontier emergency emerged. The rise and fall of Dongbuhanhu were closely linked to its involvement in the system: Approximately one-quarter of all tributary missions from Dongbuhanhu during the entire Ming dynasty occurred during the 1440s and 1450s. Dongbuhanhu used tributary institutions to enhance its own power, creating an ironic scenario in which the tributary system, originally conceived to consolidate imperial authority, ultimately served to undermine it.

Conclusion

Located at the intersection of the Tibetan plateau and the Chengdu plain, the Sichuan-Tibetan frontier straddled Han and Tibetan cultural-political spheres. This unique geopolitical context allowed frontier polities like Dongbuhanhu to navigate the complex power dynamics, crafting governance structures that addressed local needs while maintaining a degree of autonomy. The historical agency of such frontier polities challenges top-down narratives of imperial expansion that often frame the frontier as a passive extension of central power. In the dynamic

109. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 255, Jingtai 6/I6/*jiayin*, 5500.

110. *Ming shilu*, Yingzong *juan* 258, Jingtai 6/9/*renwu*, 5545–46.

111. Hu, "Mingdai zhonghouqi Chuanxibei."

interplay between the imperial center and its peripheries, the leaders of Dongbuhanhu, rather than merely conforming to imperial dictates, interpreted their political and cultural environment in ways that allowed them to redefine their relationship with the Ming court.

Gelek Gyaltsen was not the first native chieftain in the Sino-Tibetan contact zone to challenge regional geopolitics, nor would he be the last. Similar phenomena are found in the Kham region, where leaders like Dönyö Dorge (seventeenth century) and Gönpo Namgyel (mid-nineteenth century) sought to reshape the political landscape.[112] Like Gelek Gyaltsen, both Dönyö Dorge and Gönpo Namgyel harnessed military power and religious influence, rising to prominence during periods marked by geopolitical turbulence. Dönyö Dorge leveraged the power vacuum created by the rivalry between the Qing, Ganden Podrang, and the Qoshot Mongols to further his ambitions, while Gönpo Namgyel capitalized on Qing weakness in Kham to consolidate his control. In much the same way, Gelek Gyaltsen's ascent occurred in a time of fragile imperial presence. The Ming court—distracted by military conflicts with the Mongols to the north and Möng Mao to the south—inadvertently created a power vacuum on the frontier, thus providing the opportunity for a local leader to emerge as a significant political force. While the region was eventually drawn into the imperial orbit, the process of integration was neither smooth nor swift. Instead, it was marked by a consistent assertion of agency by local actors, who navigated and, at times, contested the forces of imperial control.[113]

112. Schwieger, "Towards a Biography of Don-Yod Rdo-Rje, King of Be-ri"; Yudru, *Rise of Gönpo Namgyel in Kham.*

113. Compared to the Ming dynasty, the Qing was far more engaged in imperial governance in the southwest. John Herman has described how early Qing reforms to the *tusi* system, on one hand, increased imperial control over these extrabureaucratic *tusi* officials, and, on the other hand, transformed local leaders into intermediaries between the central government and frontier subjects. In this process, a knowledge system that legitimized imperial expansion—what Herman terms "the cant of conquest"—gradually took shape as court officials and literati frequently traveled to the frontier. From the perspectives of literature and cartography, respectively, Hu Xiaozhen and Laura Hosteler have further examined Qing dynasty southwest travelogues and maps to explore how frontier information was collected, transcribed, and reproduced, influencing how the southwest was conceptualized across the empire. However, this does not necessarily imply that frontier leaders fully embraced Qing rule. Jodi Weinstein's work highlights how southwest non-Han locals clung to livelihood choices as a means of challenging imperial power. Juxtaposing Ming and Qing frontier

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What sets Gelek Gyaltsen's rise apart from other ambitious native chieftains on the Sichuan-Tibetan frontier is his strategic and nuanced manipulation of the tributary system. This center-periphery interplay reveals a significant gap between the ideological framework of the tributary system and its practical implementation: For Dongbuhanhu, the tributary system was only one of several tools at hand to consolidate political legitimacy. The rise of Dongbuhanhu demonstrates the perspective, agency, and motivation of participants within the tributary system. Such a restoration of the active role of frontier polities challenges the conventional view that positions frontier actors as passive recipients of imperial policy. While earlier scholarship has predominantly focused on foreign tributaries, a deeper examination is called for regarding how the court's tributary system was both shaped and reshaped through interactions with "frontier tributaries" in the Ming context.

The rise of Dongbuhanhu posed a significant frontier crisis for the Ming court. Without this crisis, the detailed documentation of such a semiautonomous frontier polity, and how a mountain king's ascent to power that defied the conventional imperial order, would have been unlikely. The short history of Dongbuhanhu's fifteenth-century development provides a lens to conceptualize center-periphery relations in Ming China, and, more fundamentally, points to the limits of the Ming's tributary system. The seemingly cohesive, Ming-centered tributary network, designed to solidify imperial control and pacify distant regions, ironically became a tool for frontier polities to undermine imperial authority. It becomes clear that the tributary system, far from being a unidirectional mechanism of imperial dominance, was in fact an institutional tool that could be manipulated by frontier leaders for their own political and material gain. For Dongbuhanhu, the tributary system was a supply line to acquire both political capital and tangible resources. But it was also this same imperial wealth and power that fueled the ambition of Gelek Gyaltsen, sparking a dangerous cycle of rivalry,

strategies, it becomes clear that the transition from indirect to direct rule in the southwest was a gradual process, with the Ming period marking only the beginning of this longue durée transformation. See Herman, "Empire in the Southwest"; Herman, "The Cant of Conquest: Tusi Offices and China's Political Incorporation of the Southwest Frontier," in Crossley, Siu, and Sutton, *Empire at the Margins*, 135–168; Hu, *Ming-Qing wenxue zhong de xinan xushi*; Hosteler, *Qing Colonial Enterprise*; Weinstein, *Empire and Identity in Guizhou*.

ultimately pushing the frontier leader to challenge the very authority that the Ming court sought to maintain.

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